

# **Ancient Universities in India**

## **Ancient Nalanda University**

Nalanda is an ancient center of higher learning in Bihar, India from 427 to 1197. Nalanda was established in the 5th century AD in Bihar, India. Founded in 427 in northeastern India, not far from what is today the southern border of Nepal, it survived until 1197. It was devoted to Buddhist studies, but it also trained students in fine arts, medicine, mathematics, astronomy, politics and the art of war.

The center had eight separate compounds, 10 temples, meditation halls, classrooms, lakes and parks. It had a nine-story library where monks meticulously copied books and documents so that individual scholars could have their own collections. It had dormitories for students, perhaps a first for an educational institution, housing 10,000 students in the university's heyday and providing accommodations for 2,000 professors. Nalanda University attracted pupils and scholars from Korea, Japan, China, Tibet, Indonesia, Persia and Turkey.

A half hour bus ride from Rajgir is Nalanda, the site of the world's first University. Although the site was a pilgrimage destination from the 1st Century A.D., it has a link with the Buddha as he often came here and two of his chief disciples, Sariputra and Moggallana, came from this area. The large stupa is known as Sariputra's Stupa, marking the spot not only where his relics are entombed, but where he was supposedly born.

The site has a number of small monasteries where the monks lived and studied and many of them were rebuilt over the centuries. We were told that one of the cells belonged to Naropa, who was instrumental in bringing Buddhism to Tibet, along with such Nalanda luminaries as Shantirakshita and Padmasambhava. A small opening in the cell revealed a tiny room where Naropa supposedly meditated.

Nalanda's main importance comes from its Buddhist roots as a center of learning. Hsuan Tsang, the famous pilgrim from China came here and studied and taught for 5 years in the 7th Century A.D. Nalanda University at that time had over 10,000 students and 3,000 teachers. For some 700 years, between the 5th and 12th Centuries, Nalanda was the center of scholarship and Buddhist studies in the ancient world. A great fire wiped out the library of over 9 million manuscripts and at the beginning of the 12th Century, the Muslim invader

Bakhtiyar Khalji sacked the university. It was in the 1860's that the great archeologist Alexander Cunningham identified the site as the Nalanda University and in 1915-1916 the Archeological Survey of India began excavations of the site. What has been excavated to date is only a small part of the entire site but much of the ruins are beneath existing villages and are unlikely to be revealed. The present site is well-maintained and very pleasant to visit. Across the street is the small museum with some excellent Buddhist statues and about a kilometer away is a temple dedicated to Hsuan Tsang. Nearby are the International Centre for Buddhist Studies and the Nava Nalanda Mahavihara, set up for the research of Buddhism.



ruins of the university



general overview of part of the site



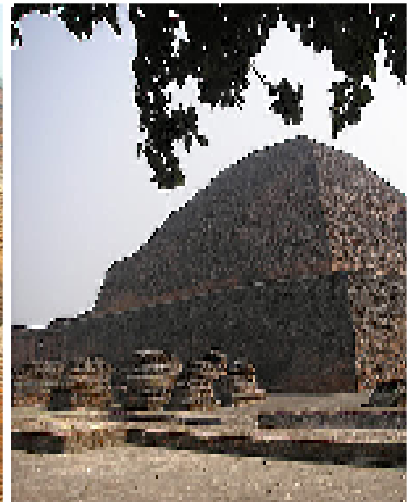
passage way



Naropa's cell and entrance to meditation cell



part of the ancient university



Sariputra's stupa



staircase up Sariputra's stupa



detail of Sariputra's stupa



Sariputra's stupa with remains of other stupas



unearthed ruins



the museum at Nalanda



statue of Hsuan Tsang

### **Ancient Takshashila University**

Takshashila, was an early Buddhist centre of learning. According to available references it is dated back to at least the 5th century BC. Some scholars date Takshashila's existence back to the 6th century BC.

Takshashila is described in some detail in later Jātaka tales, around the 5th century AD. It became a noted centre of learning at least several centuries before Christ, and continued to attract students until the destruction of the city in the 5th century AD. Takshashila is perhaps best known because of its association with Chanakya. The famous treatise Arthashastra

(Sanskrit for The knowledge of Economics) by Chanakya, is said to have been composed in Takshashila itself. Chanakya (or Kautilya), the Maurya Emperor Chandragupta and the Ayurvedic healer Charaka studied at Taxila.

Generally, a student entered Takshashila at the age of sixteen. The Vedas and the Eighteen Arts, which included skills such as archery, hunting, and elephant lore, were taught, in addition to its law school, medical school, and school of military science.

The ruins of Taxila contain buildings and buddhist stupas located over a large area. The main ruins of Taxila are divided into three major cities, each belonging to a distinct time period.

The oldest of these is the Hathial area, which yielded surface shards similar to burnished red wares (or 'soapy red wares') recovered from early phases at Charsadda, and may date between the 6th century BCE and the late 2nd millennium BCE. Bhir Mound dates from the 6th century BCE. The second city of Taxila is located at Sirkap and was built by Greco-Bactrian kings in the 2nd century BCE. The third and last city of Taxila is at Sirsukh and relates to the Kushan kings.

In addition to the ruins of the city, a number of buddhist monasteries and stupas also belong to the Taxila area. Some of the important ruins of this category include the ruins of the stupa at Dharmarajika, the monastery at Jaulian, the monastery at Mohra Muradu in addition to a number of stupas.

Legend has it that Takṣa, an ancient king who ruled a kingdom called Takṣa Khanda the modern (Tashkent) founded the city of Takṣaśilā. However Sanskrit Takṣaśilā, appears to contain the suffix śilā, "stone" with the prefix Takṣa, alluding to Takṣa, the son of Bharata and Mandavi, as related in the Ramayana.

In the Mahābhārata, the Kuru heir Parikṣit was enthroned at Takṣaśilā. According to tradition the Mahabharata was first recited at Takṣaśilā by Vaishampayana, a disciple of Vyasa at the behest of the seer Vyasa himself, at the sarpa satra yajna, "Snake Sacrifice ceremony" of Parikṣit's son Janamejaya.

According to one theory propounded by Damodar Dharmanand Kosambi, Takṣaśilā is related to Takṣaka, "carpenter" and is an alternative name for the Nāgas of ancient India.

According to scattered references which were only fixed a millennium later, it may have dated back to at least the 5th century BCE. There is some disagreement about whether Takshashila can be considered a university. While some consider Taxila to be an early university or centre of higher education, others do not consider it a university in the modern sense, in contrast to the later Nalanda University. Takshashila is described in some detail in later Jātaka tales, written in Sri Lanka around the 5th century CE.

Takshashila is considered a place of religious and historical sanctity by Hindus and Buddhists. The former do so not only because, in its time, Takshashila was the seat of Vedic learning, but also because the strategist, Chanakya, who later helped consolidate the empire of Emperor Chandragupta Maurya, was a senior teacher there. The institution is very significant in Buddhist tradition since it is believed that the Mahāyāna sect of Buddhism took shape there.

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### **Other Universities that existed in India**

Further centers include Odantapuri, in Bihar (circa 550 - 1040), Somapura, in Bangladesh (from the Gupta period to the Muslim conquest), Jagaddala, in Bengal (from the Pala period to the Muslim conquest), Nagarjunakonda, in Andhra Pradesh, Vikramaśīla, in Bihar (circa 800-1040), Sharada Peeth, in modern day Kashmir, Valabhi, in Gujarat (from the Maitrak period to the Arab raids), Varanasi in Uttar Pradesh (8th century to modern times), Kanchipuram, in Tamil Nadu, Manyakheta, in Karnataka, Puspagiri, in Orissa and Ratnagiri, in Orissa. In Sri Lanka, Sunethradevi Pirivena, a centre of Buddhist learning in Sri Lanka, founded circa 1415 AD.